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ABSTRACT

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of their students' behavior problems in nursery classes. A total of 154 female teachers from rural, small town, and urban areas in Greece completed a self-reporting questionnaire and an evaluation of their students' behavior. The overall prevalence rate identified by teachers for all behavior problems in their students was 14.3 percent, with 2.1 percent perceived as very serious. More boys than girls were perceived to have behavior problems in general, and conduct problems in particular. An almost equal percentage of boys and girls were perceived as showing serious emotional problems. While the gender, age, and academic achievement of the children, as well as the teacher's years of experience, were found to be significant factors, the socioeconomic status of the children was not. An appendix provides sample questions from the teacher questionnaire. Contains 49 references. (MDM)

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# TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDRENS' BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS IN NURSERY CLASSES IN GREECE

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## ABSTRACT

The study was undertaken in Greece to investigate teachers' perceptions of children's behaviour problems in nursery classes in Greece. A questionnaire developed in an earlier study was applied to a female teacher sample of 154, selected from nursery schools in cities, small towns and rural areas in three distinct geographic locations in Greece. The total sample of pupils in the study was 3.091 (boys N:1.568, girls N:1.523).

The overall prevalence rate identified by teachers for all behaviour problems was 14.3 percent, with 2.1 percent perceived as "very serious" and 5.8 percent "serious" and "very serious". More boys than girls were perceived to have behaviour problems in general (ratio 2:1) and conduct problems in particular. However, almost equal percentage of boys and girls were perceived as showing serious emotional problems. Gender, age, children's academic achievement teachers' teaching experience were found to be significant factors, but the socio-economic status of the child was insignificant in this study.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite differences in terminology in the study of behaviour problems, a comparative study of professionals, by Laurence and Steed (1984), working with children, in various western Europe countries, revealed a commonly held belief, that, an increasing number of young children are displaying behaviour problems, both, in early school years and the preschool years. This view is, also, supported by the work of Lawrence and Steed (1986) and Laing and Chazan (1987) in the U.K. Richman et al (1982) and Egeland et al (1990) further comment that early onset behaviour problems at pre-school level tend to persist into the formal school years, and may prove to be long lasting if no intervention is attempted.

Some researchers (Bailey.1989, Chazan and Laing.1985) argue that early identification of behaviour problems is difficult and potentially detrimental to the child, but they and others ( McGuire and Earls.1991, Asby.1978) also support the view that early screening facilitates early intervention.

Most of the preschool age studies in U.S.A and U.K, over the last two decades, have been part of more general studies, undertaken in the primary sector ( for example, Werry and Quay. 1971, Kelly et al. 1977, Rubin and Balow.1978, McGhee and Short.1991, in U.S.A., Ryle et al.1965, Chazan and Jackson.1971;1974, Baker et al.1985, Morgan and Dunn.1988, in U.K., McGee et al.1984, in New Zealand. Only a few studies have been exclusively carried out in nursery school settings, that is, McGuire and Richman (1986), Laing (1984), in the UK and Luk et al (1991) in Hong Kong.

Estimates of the number of children with behaviour problems depend heavily on the definitions, the criteria, that are used, and the source which makes the estimate (Kauffman.1989, Zebel.1988, Smith et al.1988, Kavale et al.1986). However, an overall 1.5 per cent to 3 per cent of children are perceived as having severe and chronic problems. This figure reaches 7 per cent if children with moderate difficulties are included in the definition. If pupils with mild problems are counted, the prevalence figures rise to between 20 and 30 per cent, and even as high as 50 per cent in some cases (Clarizio and McCoy.1983).

Research results, generally, suggest that boys tend to have higher prevalence rates of behaviour problems than girls (Laing.1984, McGuire and Richman.1986a, Luk et al.1991). Boys problems are, especially, associated with aggressive, acting-out, conduct disorders and social maladjustment, while, prevalence figures of withdrawn and neurotic behaviours are almost always the same for boys and girls ,although girls show a slight excess.

Studies undertaken among children of a wide age range report that younger children far exceed older children in the amount of deviant behaviour. However, studies exclusively undertaken among preschoolers have revealed contradictory results. For example, Laing (1984) found that the number of children with difficulties was greater in the young age group (36 to 47 months) than in older children (48 to 63 months). McGuire and Richman (1986), on the other hand, reported no significant differences between three-year-olds (36-47 months) and four-years-olds (48-59 months).

The relationship between intelligence and academic achievement has been frequently studied by researchers of school age children (Rutter.1964, Yule and Rutter.1970, Shepherd et al.1971, Ramasut.1981), revealing a tendency for academic performance and maladjustment to be strongly associated. Davie et al (1972) comment that, although many studies revealed an association between educational backwardness and maladjustment, however, the nature and overlap of them is not conclusive. It does, however, appear that academic achievement has been revealed to be an important factor in determining how teachers perceive children's behaviour problems in the classroom.

Some studies, for example, Chazan and Jackson (1971;1974), Davie et al (1972), Rubin and Balow (1978), reported that children from the manual social classes were at far greater risk than those from non-manual classes. However, results from Miller et al's (1974) study showed no significant association between behaviour problems and social class, while Lapouse and Monk's (1964), Moore's (1966) and Papatheodorou and Ramasut's (1992) studies reported social class differences to be in favour of lower or manual working class group.

Finally, a group of studies, conducted in U.S.A (Sparks.1952, Kelly et al.1977, Ritter.1989), which looked at teachers' teaching experience and its relation to behaviour problems, were no abled to establish any association. In contrast, the work of Borg and Falzon (1990), on the island of Malta, found that, the more experienced the teachers the fewer the behaviour problems they perceived.

The writers' previous study (Papatheodorou.1990), which investigated teachers' perceptions of children's behaviour problems in nursery classes in Greece, we found the following items to be both the "Most common" or "Common" behaviour problems, namely:

i. showing-off behaviour;
ii. domineering behaviour;
iii. hyperactivity;
iv. attention seeking;
v. aggressive behaviour;
vi. poor concentration/ lack of perseverance.

The prevalence rate was found to be 11.8 per cent for the total sample. More boys than girls (ratio 2:1) were identified by teachers as exhibiting behaviours, and the less experienced the teachers the more the behaviour problems they identified.

The main concern of the present study was to find out Greek nursery teachers perceptions of the extent and nature of behaviour problems, identified by them.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken among 225 nursery teachers in Greece, during 1992, with a response rate 68.4 per cent. The method of selecting the sample followed multi-stage, stratified and simple random sampling (Bartz.1981, Hannagan.1982, Borg and Gall.1983). Ceratin variables such as the location of the school (cities, small town, rural areas), the type of the school (public, private) and the general socio-economic status of the

area (professional middle class, middle class, working class) were also into account.

Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix.A), as that used in the earlier study (Papatheodorou.1990), on two children in their class, whom they perceived as exhibiting behaviour problems. After each statement of the questionnaire three choices were given, namely "very serious", "serious", "Not very serious" (Rutter.1967), so that teachers could indicate the seriousnes of each statement. Additional information about (i) the child for whom the questionnaire was completed, and (ii) the total number of children exhibiting behaviour problems in the class, in general, and acting-out and withdrawn behaviours, in particular, was, also, requested.

Additional information was asked for (i) about the school and the teacher; (ii) about the help, which is available to nursery teachers for serious and persistent behaviour problems; (iii) teachers' suggestions for improving the facilities and services of the nursery school; and (iv) teachers' techniques for managing children's behaviour problems.

The pre-pilot study

In the pre-pilot study the questionnaire was applied to a selected sample of Greek nursery teachers to verify and clarify the items referring to behaviour problems.

Statements elicited from the Greek teachers were grouped into broad categories. Three independent judges, all qualified

Greek teachers, and with the researchers themselves classified the statements into the following three categories, which have been revealed by many other studies (e.g. Quay.1972, Behar and Stringfield.1974, Achenbach.1978, McGuire and Richman.1986b).

- Conduct disorders (Acting-out) which disturb the teacher and the learning and teaching process.
- Emotional problems (Withdrawn behaviours) which do not affect the teaching process, but which may affect the child's learning.
- Developmentally related behaviours (Immaturity), which do not necessarilly disturb the teacher, but which affect the child's learning and the teaching process.

The pilot study

The pilot study was conducted on a sample of 28 nursery teachers who were asked to complete the a questionnaire on two children perceived by them as exhibiting behaviour problems.

The statistical analysis for the reliability coefficient was carried out, using the split-half method (Downie and Heath.1983, Borg and Gall.1983) and employing the "α" (alpha) coefficient (Anastasi.1989). It was to be .92.

## RESULTS - DISCUSSION

Table I. shows that 2.1 per cent of the total sample of children exhibited "Very serious" problems; 5.8 per cent "Very serious" and "Serious" problems combined. When "Not very serious " behaviour problems were included the prevalence rate rose to

## THE OVERALL PREVALENCE RATE

Table I: The prevelence rate of Behaviour Problems, according to the degree of seriousness for the total sample of pupils (N:3091) and for boys (N:1568) and girls (N:1523).

| Degree of seriousness of B.P / Pupils' gender | Boys and Girls % | Boys % | Girls % | Ratio Boys:Girls |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Very serious" | 2.1 | 3.4 | 0.9 | 3.7:1 |
| "Very serious" "Serious" (combined) | 5.8 | 8.1 | 3.6 | 2.2:1 |
| "Very serious" "Serious" "Not very serious" (combined) | 14.3 | 17.7 | 10.9 | 1.6:1 |

14.3 per cent. The overall prevalence rate of children perceived as exhibiting behaviour problems, of various degrees of seriousness, was found to fall within the same range of prevalence rates reported by many other researchers. More boys than girls exhibited behaviour problems, in general, and they exceeded girls in the "Very serious" category with a ratio approaching 4:1.

Of those children reported as exhibiting behaviour problems, (Table II) more were perceived as acting-out than withdrawn. Boys were perceived as exhibiting more acting-out behaviours than withdrawn behaviours. Girls were perceived as more withdrawn than acting-out. However, there was almost an equal percentage of girls and boys exhibited withdrawn behaviours in the categories "Very serious" and "Serious", a ratio 1:1).

T-test analysis revealed children's gender to be a significant mediator for teachers' perception, at the level of $p < .001$, in both:

- conduct problems ($t=4.73$, $p= .000$), and
- emotional problems ($t=4.97$, $p= .000$), but not for
- developmentally related problems ($t=0.00$, $p= .99$).

Boys were perceived as more acting-out and girls as more withdrawn. The insignificance of gender in relation to developmentally related problems, may suggests that teachers are generally well aware of children's development. In the context of teachers education in Greece this finding seems to be meaningful, since great attention is given to child psychology and, especially child development.

## THE PREVALENCE RATE OF ACTING-OUT AND WITHDRAWN BEHAVIOURS

Table II: The prevalence rate of acting-out and withdrawn behaviours, according to the degree of seriousness, for the total number of children perceived by their teachers as exhibiting behaviour problems in general (N:445).

| Type of B.P. / Seriousness of B.P | Acting-out | | | Withdrawn | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B % | G % | T % | B % | G % | T % |
| "Very serious" | 10.1 | 0.7 | 10.8 | 2.0 | 2.5 | 4.5 |
| "Serious" | 11.9 | 4.3 | 16.2 | 4.5 | 5.4 | 9.9 |
| "Not very serious" | 25.2 | 5.8 | 31.0 | 8.7 | 18.9 | 27.6 |
| Total | 47.2 | 10.8 | 58.0 | 15.2 | 26.8 | 42.0 |

6.5 7.9

A further t-test analysis revealed children's age, also, to be a significant factor, at the level of $p < .05$), in:

- conduct disorders ($t=2.09$, $p= .03$), but insignificant in
- emotional problems ($t=0.49$, $p= .62$), and
- developmentally related problems ($t=1.49$, $p= .13$).

Older children were perceived as exhibiting significantly more conduct disorders than the younger ones. It might be that these findings are closely related to teachers expectations. Greek teachers, as those found in the study of Ryle et al (1965), either expect older children to behave in more appropriate ways than the younger ones or they prefer to ignore the misbehaviour of the younger ones.

One-way analysis of variance revealed pupils' academic achievement to be, also, a significant factor across all three types of behaviour problems, at the levelof $p<.01$ in conduct problems ( $df=2$, $F=5.10$, $p=.006$), and at the level of $p<.001$ in emotional problems ($df=2$, $F=6.68$, $p=.001$), and in developmentally related problems ($df=2$, $F=13.07$, $p=.000$).

Interestingly, a multiple range test (Student-Newman-Keuls) revealed that, of the pupils identified as having behaviour problems, children with "Good" academic achievement were perceived as exhibiting more behaviour problems than those with "Not very good" academic achievement. However, these findings might be seen and understood in the light of Morgan and Dunn's (1988) work, which reported that 'visible' children, that is acting-out/extrovert children, who demand a lot of teachers attention and time, are very often viewed optimistically as

lively children. It is suggested that the present findings may confirm this view; that Greek teachers may, also, positively perceive the acting-out children as lively, bright, interested and with abilities leading to good academic achievement.

Children with "Not very good" academic achievement were perceived as exhibiting more emotional problems than children in the other two groups, that is those with "Very good" or "Good" academic achievement. This may, also, be interpreted in the light of Morgan and Dunn's (1988) study, in which it is reported that 'invisible' children are almost always shy/anxious children and the marginal survivors. They comment that, although shy children are by no means unsuccesful, however, they are not comparable with "...the more clear signs of high ability implicit in the extroverted behaviour patterns already associated with the lively, imaginative and articulate 'visible' children..." (p.10). On the other hand, for marginal survivors who try not to be exposed, there is always the danger that their progress goes unnoticed and their abilities are underestimated. In addition, overanxiety may constitute a real problem in some children's academic achievement.

In this study, the worse the children's academic achievement the more the developmentally related problems they presented. This finding may be justified for the children's age, if, again, developmentally related problems are seen as a cause and not as a result of poor academic achievement, since such behaviours as the developmentally related are clearly and strongly associated with the level of children's academic achievement.

A one-way analysis of variance results showed children's socio-economic background to be an insignificant factor for all three types of behaviour problems, at the level of $p<.05$, that is:

- conduct problems ($df=3$, $F=2.3$, $p= .10$),
- emotional problems ($df=3$, $F=1.25$, $p=.29$),
- developmentally related problems ($df=3$, $f= .54$, $p= .65$),

However, a somewhat higher number of children attending private schools and belonging to the professional middle class were perceived as exhibiting behaviour problems in generel (Papatheodorou.1992) than children attending public schools and belonging to middle and working class. However, the latter finding may not seen exclusively associated with children's socio-economic background, but could also be seen in the light of the organization and ethos of the schools, and demands made on children by the different types of schools, they attend.

The insignificance of the socio-economic background to behavior problems appears to contradict the findings of other well-known studies in the U.S.A and the U.K. This may be becouse of the difficulties of transposing British and American models of social class structure to the Greek situation.

Finally, a one-way analysis revealed teachers' experience to be a significant factor, at the level of $p< .05$, for both:

- conduct problems ($df=2$, $F=3.65$, $p= .02$), and
- emotional problems ($df=2$, $F=2.90$, $p=.05$), but insignificant for
-developmentally related problems ($df=2$, $F=1.84$, $p=.15$)

A multirange test (Student-Neuman-Keuls) revealed that teachers with "Up to 5 years" of teaching experience reported more conduct problems than teachers with "5 to 15 years" or "Over 16 years" of teaching experience. Teachers with "6 to 15 years" of teaching experience, on the other hand, reported more emotional problems than teachers of the other two groups.

It seems that teachers with longer teaching experience tend to become more tolerant and identify fewer conduct problems, as Borg and Falzon (1990) have suggested. They, also, appear to be more aware and sensitive to emotional problems, identifying more than their less experienced colleaques. However, teachers with "Over 16 years" of teaching experience identified fewer emotional problems than teachers with "6 to 15 years" of teaching experience. Here,it must be said that, most of the teachers with "Over 16 years" of teaching experience, also, had the shortest training, that is one year. So, this finding may be to insufficient or inappropriate initial teacher training.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings of this study of pre-school behaviour problems agree with other studies, conducted in a variety of countries, in terms of the overall prevalence rates, the nature of problems, the variables of gender, age and academic achievement of the child, suggesting a certain degree of universality of behaviour problem patterns for children at preschool ages.

However, the findings differ from the majority of well known studies with regard to social class, which found to be an insignificant factor in Greek nursery teachers' views.

Finally, the significance of teachers teaching experience in conduct and emotional problems may not be seen independently of teachers' initial training. Teaching experience may increase teachers awareness of children's behaviour problems , in general, thus compesating for any training inadequacies.

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APPENDIX.A

(Adjusted from the main questionnaire)

## STATISTICAL INFORMATION

Please indicate how many children in your class desplay behaviour problems (see definitions).

| Seriousness of behaviour / Type of behaviour | Very Serious | | Serious | | Not very serious | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| Total | | | | | | |
| Acting-out | | | | | | |
| Withdrawn | | | | | | |

Of these children, please, choose the two whom you consider to have the most serious problems and complete one of the enclosed questionnaires, for each child.

You may consider that none of the children have any serious problem. Nevertheless you are asked to complete the questionnaire on any two children who have displayed some degree of behaviour problems this year.

## INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| - Sex | Boy | ( ) | Girl | ( ) | | |
| - Child's age | Years | ( ) | Months | ( ) | | |
| - Socio-economic background of the childs' family | Upper | ( ) | Middle<br>Unsure | ( )<br>( ) | Lower | ( ) |
| - Did the child attend previously a Day Care Nursery? | Yes | ( ) | No | ( ) | | |
| - How do you find child's academic achievement? | Very Good | ( ) | Good | ( ) | Not very Good | ( ) |
| - Does the child's behaviour annoy you? | A lot | ( ) | To a certain extent | ( ) | Not at all | ( ) |
| - Does the child's behaviour worry you? | A lot | ( ) | To a certain extent | ( ) | Not at all | ( ) |
| - How would you describe the child's physical appearance? | Very Attractive | ( ) | Attractive | ( ) | Not very Attractive | ( ) |
| - How would you describe the child's personality? | Very Attractive | ( ) | Attractive | ( ) | Not very Attractive | ( ) |

## CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

Does the child ever display any of these behaviours in school? If so please underline the behaviour and indicate how serious you consider the problem to be. Please tick the appropriate column.

| Types of behaviour problems | Seriousness: Very serious | Serious | Not very serious |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Shows aggressive behaviour, unintentionally | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 2. Behaves aggressively in order to hurt or distress | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 3. Is hyperactive/ overacting/hindering other children | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 4. Has difficulties in cooperation | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 5. Shows negativeness | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 6. Shows evidence of being over-protected | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 7. Shows withdrawn behaviour | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 8. Shows feelings of insecurity | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 9. Is attention seeking | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 10. Shows unhapiness/depression | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 11. Shows exessive shyness/timidity | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 12. Shows poor concentration/perseverance | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 13. Showing-off behaviour | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 14. Shows provocative behaviour | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 15. Shows domineering behaviour | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 16. Lacks motor control/is clumsy | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 17. Is rejected by peers | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |
| 18. Has communication problems | ( ) | ( ) | ( ) |

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